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SUBJECT: NEW POLL SHOWS INCREASING SUPPORT FOR FORMER
PRESIDENT JULES WIJDENBOSCH, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY

REF: 03 PARAMARIBO 116

SUMMARY

1. A poll taken of voters residing in Suriname's capital Paramaribo by a respected polling organization revealed the extent of voters' dissatisfaction with the ruling New Front coalition ahead of the upcoming May 2005 elections. Poll results indicate that former President Jules Wijdenbosch (1996-2000) currently leads the Presidential pack (with 35.7 percent of the votes) despite mass protests over his mismanagement of the economy which forced him to call for elections a year earlier than planned in 2000, a move that brought the current New Front government to power. The National Democratic Party led by former military strongman Desi Bouterse emerged as the most popular party (with 18 percent of the votes). A significant number of voters (43.5%) remained uncommitted. Both ruling coalition and opposition politicians found reason for optimism in the poll results. End Summary.

RULING NEW FRONT COALITION DOWN IN POLLS

2. Suriname's local media reported on July 5 and 6 the results of a poll conducted June 11 to 13 by the respected Institute for Development Oriented Studies (IDOS), which revealed that former President Jules Wijdenbosch (1996-2000) had captured the most votes ahead of the May 2005 elections. 35.7 percent of a random sample of 350 voters residing in Paramaribo, the country's capital, expressed preference for Wijdenbosch despite the fact that Wijdenbosch's mismanagement of the country's economy spurred mass demonstrations by opposition groups and labor unions which forced him to call for elections a year earlier than planned, a move which brought the ruling New Front coalition to power in the 2000 elections. 25.3% and 21.6% of respondents expressed their preference for former military strongman Desi Bouterse and for President Ronald Venetiaan, respectively.

3. The poll revealed that Bouterse's National Democratic Party (NDP) is the most popular political party in Paramaribo. 18% of respondents said that they would vote for NDP, an increase of 4.5% compared with a February IDOS poll. The New Front coalition, which is made up of the National Party of Suriname, the Verenigde Hervormings Partij, the Suriname Labor Party, and Pertjaja Luhur, captured 18.8% of the votes, suffering a net loss of 3.4%. A1, a new coalition of four small parties, almost doubled its support with 4.9% of the voters while only 5.6% of respondents said that they would vote for Wijdenbosch's party, Democratic National Platform 2000 (DNP 2000).

4. A striking feature of the IDOS poll concerned the significant number of uncommitted and nonvoters. According to the poll, a total of 43.3 percent of Paramaribo's voters fell into this category: 35 percent were uncommitted and 8.2 percent were non-voters. Based on these results, if the elections were held today in Paramaribo, the division of Paramaribo's 17 National Assembly seats would be as follows: Bouterse's NDP 4, the New Front coalition 3, and Wijdenbosch's DNP 2000 and A1 each one seat, while non-committed voters would control 8 seats.

REACTIONS

5. In public statements, both coalition and opposition leaders acknowledged the importance of polls in developing an election strategy and attempted to put a positive spin on the poll results. Paul Somohardjo, leader of the New Front coalition party Pertjaja Luhur (and former NF Minister of Social Affairs squeezed out in a sexual harassment scandal in February 2003), emphasized that the results have to be placed in the proper perspective by taking into account the limited polling area (Paramaribo),

as well as other factors, such as the age group, ethnicity, and the address of respondents. (See Reftel.) For his part, former President Jules Wijdenbosch focused on the need to tap into the large number of uncommitted voters who he said would decide the elections. He also declared that it is time to abandon the National Assembly's appointing the country's President after elections in favor of electing the president by popular vote. Winston Jessurun, leader of the newly established coalition A1, expressed his

pleasure with the doubling of voter support. Jessurun vowed that A1, which is campaigning for a new draft constitution with a parliamentary system and proportional representation, would work harder to make itself more widely known to capture a significant share of the uncommitted voters.

COMMENT

16. The IDOS poll results are yet another sign of existing dissatisfaction with the ruling New Front coalition. Voters remain unhappy chiefly with rising living costs, despite the country's projected 5 percent economic growth, the increased crime rate, and Venetiaan's perceived lack of charisma, along with his administration's slow-paced decision-making. They see Wijdenbosch as a can-do, decisive politician and are willing to downplay his mismanagement of the economy and the widespread belief that his administration raised the bar on corruption. The popularity of Wijdenbosch as a leader and of Bouterse's NDP in Paramaribo, where more than half of the population resides, is telling; it points to the battle that the New Front coalition must wage to capture enough National Assembly seats to form a government after the 2005 elections. END COMMENT.

BARNES

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